

Storm Country Polly

by Grace Miller White
Illustrated by R.H. Livingstone

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"The ground's kinda wabby, ain't it, Oscar?" Polly glibbed.

"Get out," commanded Robert, once more.

Bennett scrambled to his feet, shook his fist at Polly, snatched up the little dead lamb, and in another moment had climbed the fence and was gone.

"What were you fighting about?" began Robert, looking keenly at Polly.

Tears hung on the girl's lashes, and the sensitive underlip quivered.

"Oscar said as how Nannyop were his," she murmured, "Weren't it awful for him to swat it with that stone that way?"

"Did you—?" He broke off the question abruptly. He was going to ask her if she had stolen the lamb; but an expression in the pleading, misty eyes stopped him.

"I found the little feller drownin' in the creek, sir," she explained with bowed head. "I just took him home to love him, that was all."

The strange, thrilling emotion that had overcome Robert but a short time ago in the presence of this squatter girl attacked him again.

"What can I do to help you, child?" he demanded sharply.

Polly flung out her hand. Help! that was what the squatters wanted. The little lamb was dead. Nothing could ever hurt it any more. But there were her people—

"Just help Daddy Hopkins!"—she choked and went on—"an' all the poor folks in the Silent City, an'—all—I'll love you forever and forever!"

After that the "littiest mother" made large strides upward toward the "greatest mother." Every little worried thing in the woods, every heavy heart in the squatter settlement felt the difference in Polly Hopkins.

She smiled more, she talked more; and when she found a group of her women-folks wondering how their absent ladies were, she led them in smiling assurance to Old Marc's fence and there repeated what Robert Percival had said about the Greatest Mother in the World.

One morning Pollyop was cleaning the shanty and Granny Hope was seated by the stove. A sharp rap came on the door. When Polly opened it and recognized the caller, she would have closed the door and barred it if a man's heavy boot, thrust across the threshold, had not prevented her.

There in his riding clothes, haughty and frowning, stood Marcus MacKenzie.

"Where's Jeremiah Hopkins?" he demanded, eyeing Pollyop sternly.

She flinched with the edge of her apron. Had MacKenzie come to learn her best beloved?

"My daddy's gone out," she returned finally, in a low tone.

"Then I'll wait," said Marcus. "I'll sit down and wait."

Polly set out a chair for him, her legs trembling so she could scarcely stand. Granny Hope grunted out a word of greeting, but the man gave her no answer; and, after blinking at him a few times, the old woman fell asleep.

"This is a rotten hole," spat out MacKenzie presently, looking at the girl.

This scornful comment on the quarters Daddy Hopkins worked so hard to support touched the squatter girl

she replied, and she straightened her shoulders with dignity.

"Rotten, just the same," repeated Marcus. "Say, you! Come and stand here before me!"

He touched a spot on the floor with his riding whip; and Polly stepped upon it.

"Now you listen to me," he said sternly.

MacKenzie lifted his riding whip threateningly, and every man with a growl started forward; but as the whip fell back to his side, they sank down again.

Then it was that he shifted the whip to his left hand and took from his pocket a shining pistol; and although Polly whitened, she held her ground.

"And you, you impudent hussy," snapped MacKenzie, "what have you got to do with it? What are you, anyway?"

In spite of the deadly thing held in the white, strong fingers, Polly's head went up a bit.

"It's our home, mister; all ye got,"

she replied, and she straightened her shoulders with dignity.

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